

AICS

Aboriginal Independent Community Schools' Support Unit

3/41 Walters Drive
OSBORNE PARK WA 6017
Tel: (08) 9244 1077 Fax: (08) 9244 2786
Email: aicsperth@aics.wa.edu.au
Homepage: www.aics.wa.edu.au

P O Box 2373
BROOME WA 6725
Tel: (08) 9193 6480 Fax: (08) 9193 6484
Email: aicsbr@wn.com.au

The Secretary,
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee
Suite S1.61, Parliament House
CANBERRA, ACT 2600



Dear Sir/Madam

Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

I am writing on behalf of the Independent Aboriginal Community Schools in Western Australia. These schools are located in the Kimberley, Pilbara, Great Sandy Desert, Murchison, Goldfields, Great Southern and metropolitan areas and represent the considerable diversity of Aboriginal communities in the state.

As the Coordinator of the AIC Schools' Support Unit's Perth Office I am directly answerable to the schools' governing bodies. My role includes keeping the AIC Schools informed of developments in government policy and ensuring that their views are represented at various forums. It is in this capacity that I am making a submission to this inquiry.

Addressing Specific Terms of Reference

This submission focuses on Indigenous students' disabilities that arise from otitis media, which is endemic in remote communities and is extremely high in rural and urban environments.

The particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas.

Recurrent otitis media infections within Indigenous communities in the infant, preschool and school-age populations has led to a situation where these children have a significant prospect of developing permanent hearing loss. This has the effect of delaying the development of individuals' speech and hearing, leading to significant behaviour problems and limiting students' ability to acquire high order literacy skills.

The impact of conductive hearing loss on students' learning does not become apparent until the students are around eight years of age when the curriculum becomes more complicated. It is highly probable that 90% Indigenous students in any classroom throughout Australia will have a history of otitis media. This is in stark contrast with non-Indigenous students where there may be one or two in a classroom who suffer learning problems associated with conductive hearing loss.

The effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs

There are no coordinated early intervention initiatives concerning ear health in Indigenous communities at the state or national levels. This is an indicator of the level of inertia in this important area.

Access to and adequacy of funding support in both the public and private sectors

- The intermittent nature of otitis media means that it may not be observed by a health professional on the day of assessment and therefore the students concerned are not judged to be "disabled". (This is compounded by lack of access to health professionals as result of isolation which generally means that students with otitis media are not assessed at all.) While this is well known and understood in the health arena it is not accepted by the agencies that fund students with disabilities in the independent school sector. This has the effect of excluding hearing impaired Indigenous students within the AIC Schools from access to resources that are administered by the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia. Existing funding programs need to be changed so that students with a history of otitis media can be supported. The AIC Schools currently receive no support from Commonwealth Targeted Programs (CTP), a Department of Education, Science and Training initiative, for students with otitis media or conductive hearing loss.
- It is well documented that otitis media is endemic in remote Indigenous communities however it does not qualify as a disability under the CTP guidelines. This fact makes a mockery of the stated intention of the CTP to focus on students from low socio-economic, non-English speaking, Indigenous and remote areas.
- Recently CTP amalgamated into a single program that provides funds for literacy, numeracy, and special needs - focusing on students from low socio-economic, non-English speaking, Indigenous and remote areas. In the case of the AIC Schools, not only are students with otitis media excluded from access to special needs funding but also the amount of literacy/numeracy dollars is reduced as a result of the amalgamation of these three areas. This has the effect of making it more difficult for the AIC Schools to put in place programs to assist students that have fallen behind as a result of otitis media and conductive hearing loss.
- Current funding models focus on individual student needs and their level of disability at the time of assessment. An alternative funding model needs to be considered for schools that are serving Indigenous communities where a significant proportion of the students are likely to be suffering from conductive hearing loss. That is, there should be a funding model that is able to take into account the needs of significant groups of students within a school with the aim of encouraging the development whole school approaches to teaching hearing impaired students. At the moment the individual student funding model is not able to take into account the impact that a large proportion of hearing impaired students has on the teaching and learning environment. The current funding model, which focuses on the needs of individual students, causes Indigenous students to be excluded from access to educational resources that are appropriate to their needs.

Teacher training and professional development

Professional development initiatives in the area of otitis media and conductive hearing loss are currently being piloted in Western Australia as part of the National Indigenous Literacy and

Numeracy Strategy. There are no other initiatives of this nature occurring in schools or in teacher training courses offered by Western Australian universities.

The proper role of the Commonwealth and states and territories should be in supporting the education of students with disabilities

- As a major source of project funding for AIC Schools, the Commonwealth should ensure that CTP funds are available to support improved educational outcomes for Indigenous students afflicted with otitis media. This is currently not the case.
- For decades the issue of otitis media in Indigenous communities and its impact on education has fallen between the health and education portfolios. This has contributed significantly to the development of a culture of inertia. It is therefore incumbent on the Commonwealth to develop strategies which compel state and territory education and health providers to:
 - a) Recognise otitis media as an Indigenous health priority (just as trachoma was in the 1970s and 1980s).
 - b) Work cooperatively to overcome this significant health and education issue.

An appropriate action for the Commonwealth to take would be the establishment of an Indigenous ear health and education taskforce that would be required to report to both the education and health Ministerial Councils.

Please contact me if you require further information.

Yours sincerely



Les Mack
COORDINATOR - PERTH

19 April 2002